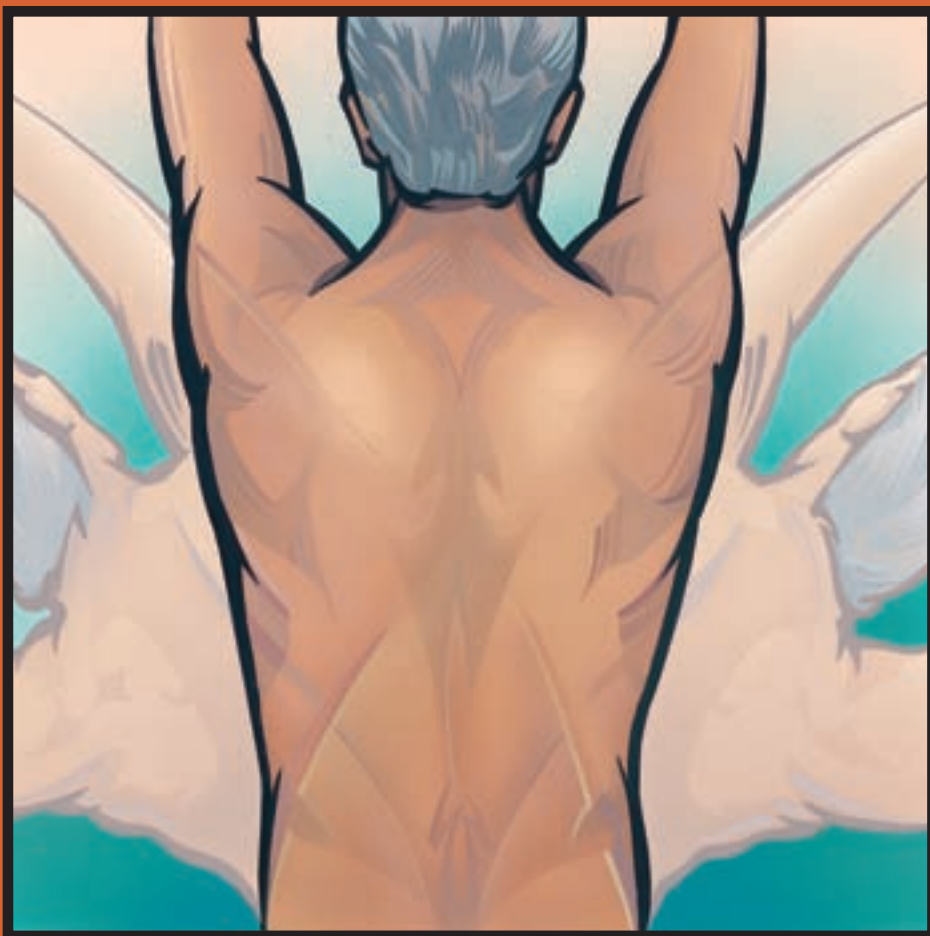


BACK FITNESS



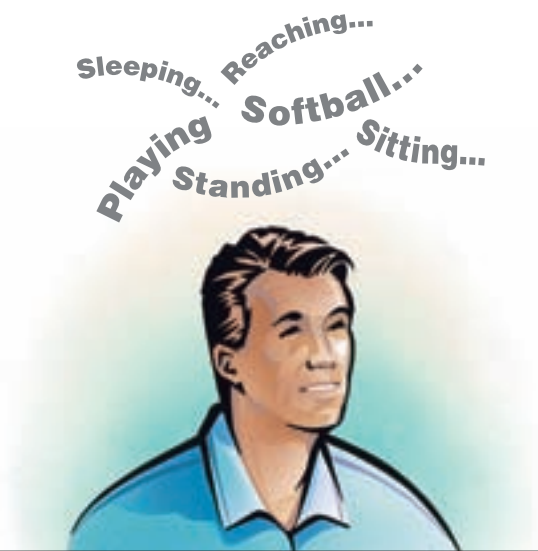
PERSONAL ACTION GUIDE

A Back That's Fit for Life

No matter what shape you're in now, you can build a stronger, more flexible, more fit back. This booklet can help you prevent back problems before they start. If you have back pain now, or have had it in the past, this guide may also help you avoid future problems.

Why Back Fitness Matters

When your back is strong and flexible, you can move freely. You can stand, sit, lift, and stretch with ease. A fit back allows you to do the things that matter to you—whether it's washing the car, hugging someone you love, or just reaching for the coffee. With a fit back, you can stay involved in your life and the world around you.



What's Ahead

Each of the skills in this booklet can help you increase your back fitness:

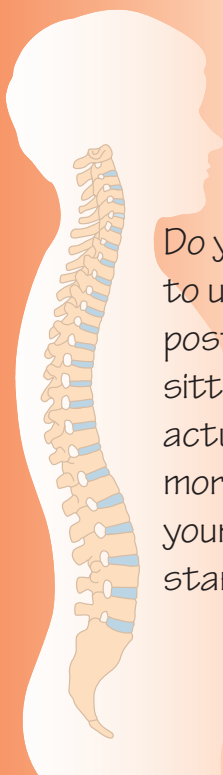
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SKILL 1

Learning About Posture

When correctly aligned, the spine has three natural curves that form an S-shape.



Do your best to use good posture while sitting. Sitting actually puts more stress on your back than standing does.

Good posture protects you from injury. It also increases your comfort. Aim for good posture throughout the day.

❑ Check Your Posture

The human body works best when it is properly aligned. To improve your standing posture, follow these steps:

- Take a moment to close your eyes and feel your body. Then breathe deeply and relax your shoulders, hips, and knees.
- Now, from the very top of your head, lift up just a bit. Think of a line linking your ears, shoulders, hips, and ankles. Adjust your body to follow the line. You may need to relax your hips and tuck your buttocks under a bit.
- Next, take a look at yourself in a mirror. Is one ear, shoulder, or hip higher than the other? They should be level.



Align your ears, shoulders, and hips.

❑ Check How You Sit

When you sit properly, pressure on your back is reduced. Try these steps:

- Sit so that the curve of your lower back fits easily against the chair. Keep your gaze level.
- Support your feet. They should be flat on the floor or on a footrest. Your knees should be level with your hips.
- Adjust the chair height as needed. Sit so your forearms are level with the work surface.



Keeps the spine's three curves aligned when you sit.

Proper Posture Helps

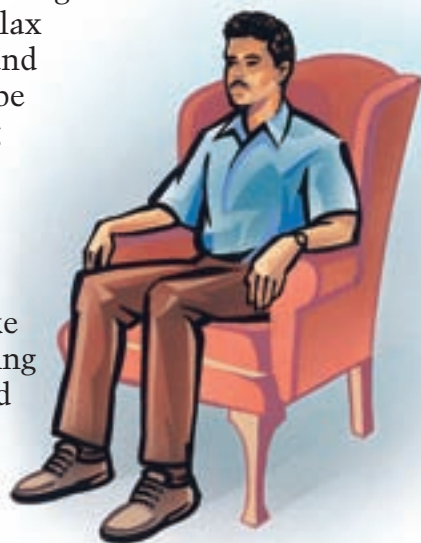
Do your back a favor. Whether you're standing, driving, walking, sitting, or sleeping, do your best to maintain proper posture. When your back is aligned, it's more likely to stay safe throughout the day.

- ❑ **Standing in place.** Rest one foot on a stool or low box to ease pressure on your lower back. Switch feet often. If you can, adjust the height of your work surface so your neck and shoulders aren't under strain.

- ❑ **Driving.** Sit close enough to the steering wheel to keep your knees slightly bent. For comfort, your knees should be level with your hips or just a bit lower. Sit as straight as you can. The curve of your lower back should be fully supported.

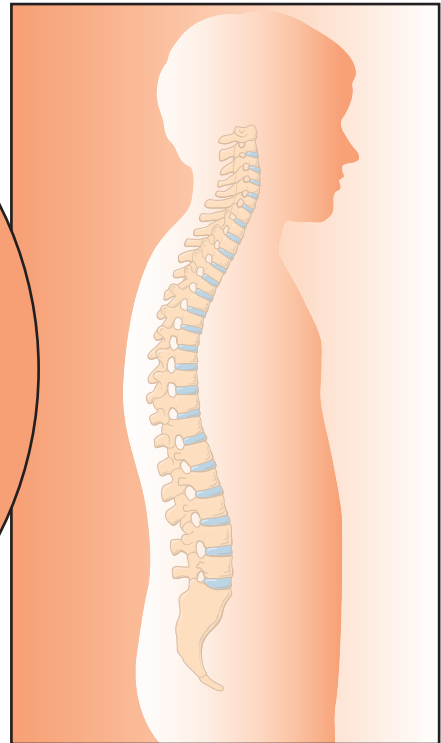
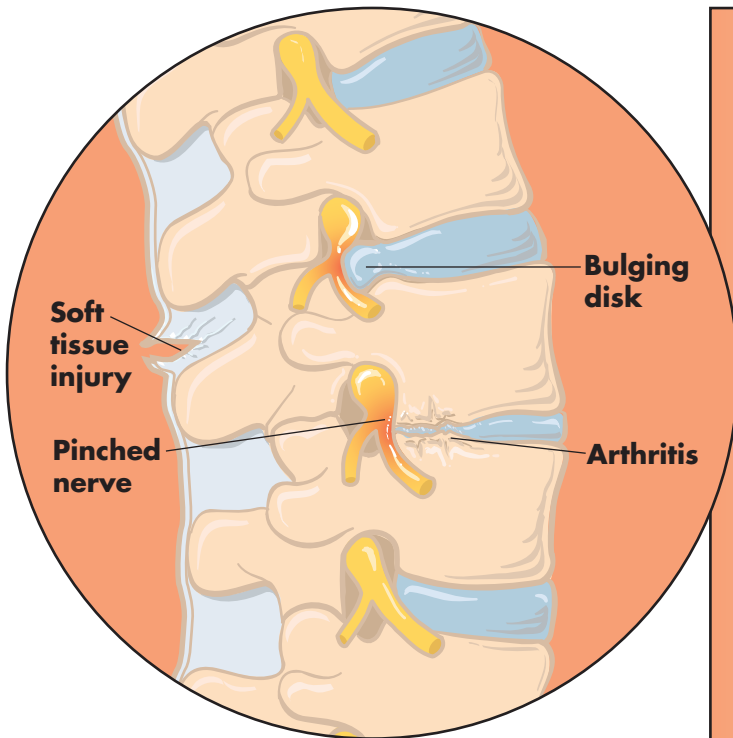
- ❑ **Walking.** Stand tall and walk with your head up. Let your arms swing while you walk. This helps relax muscles. Wear shoes that fit and support your feet. If you will be standing or walking for a long time, don't wear high heels.

- ❑ **Sitting and sleeping.** Choose your furniture with care. Make sure it's not causing or increasing your back pain. Chairs should allow for comfortable, correct sitting posture. Use pillows for added support if needed. Your bed should support your back's natural curves without being too hard or too soft.



Poor Posture Hurts

Over time, poor posture causes back strain and pain. And if you already have a back problem, poor posture can make it worse. Disk, bone, nerve, and soft tissue problems can all be affected by poor posture.



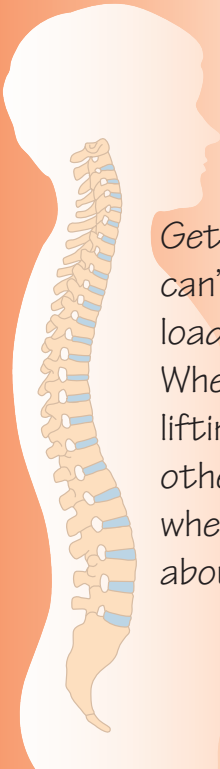
Poor posture affects the entire spine.

- ❑ **A bulging disk** (sometimes called a “slipped” disk). Disks act as cushions between the bones in the spine. If a disk is injured or starts to wear out, its jellylike core may begin to bulge. The disk can then press on nearby nerves, causing pain.
- ❑ **Arthritis.** Over time, joint surfaces can lose their smoothness. They can become irregular in shape. When this happens, tissue around the joint may become swollen and painful.
- ❑ **A pinched nerve.** A bony growth or a bulging disk can put pressure on a nerve. Alignment problems in the spine may also put pressure on nerves. A pinched nerve may cause back pain. It can also cause pain in one or both legs.
- ❑ **Soft tissue problems.** When poor posture is a habit, the soft tissues that support the spine tire and weaken. Muscles and ligaments (tough bands of connective tissue) in the back are then more easily injured.

SKILL 2

Lifting Correctly

Lifting safely doesn't take extra time, and it is the single best thing you can do to reduce your risk of back injury.

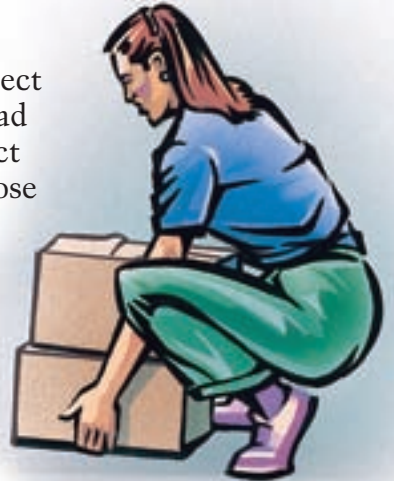


Get help if you can't lift the load alone. When team lifting, tell the other person when you're about to rise.

To learn the correct way to lift, read the checklist below. When all of these steps are habits, you'll be able to lift safely.

How to Lift

- ❑ **Lift “twice.”** First lift the object in your mind. Picture the load and think through the correct lifting methods. Then put those methods to work and lift.
- ❑ **Get close to the load.** Place your feet about shoulder-width apart. Lower your body by bending at the hips and knees. Do not bend at your waist. To limit strain on your back, “hug” the object against your body.
- ❑ **Brace your back.** Lock in the natural curves of your spine. To do this, pull in your stomach muscles while you lift. Your stomach muscles brace and protect the spine.
- ❑ **Lift with your legs.** Press down with your feet. Then, allow the powerful muscles in your legs to lift your body and the object. Try to lift smoothly. Rapid or jerky movements can throw you off balance or cause injury.
- ❑ **If you need to turn,** first brace your back by pulling in your stomach muscles. Then step in the direction you need to go. Move your body as a unit. Don't twist at your waist or knees.



Prepare for a safe lift by getting close to the load.



Align your hips under your shoulders as you lift.

SKILL 3

Relaxing Mind and Body

Being relaxed helps keep your mind healthy and your back ready to move.

Rest and relax your mind and your body. Take short breaks often. Walk around. Stretch. Switch tasks. Also give the following a try.

❑ Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a simple way to reduce stress. You can do it almost any time you need to relax.

- Inhale slowly through your nose. Let your lungs and stomach expand.
- Hold your breath for 2 or 3 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth until your lungs feel empty. Repeat 3 or 4 times.

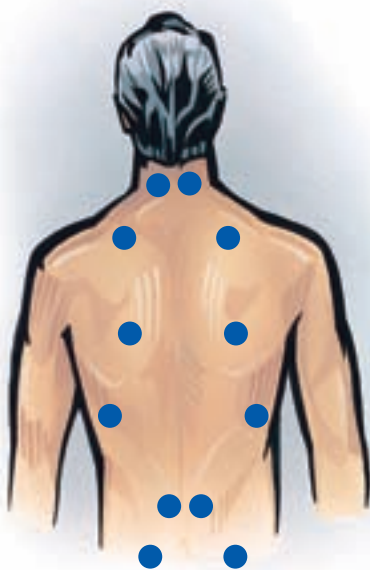


When deep breathing, let your stomach expand.

❑ Relieve Tension

Muscle tension can create tender spots called “trigger points.” The tips below may help relieve muscle tension.

- Press the trigger point if you can reach it. If not, lie on a soft tennis ball, or ask a friend to press the spot. Use steady pressure for 10 to 15 seconds. Breathe deeply. Repeat a few times.
- Massage trigger points with ice for 2 to 5 minutes. Press lightly at first. Slowly increase firmness.



Common trigger points



Make time to relax. Start by setting aside 5 minutes daily.

SKILL 4

Controlling Weight with Nutrition

When you eat healthy, you don't have to starve yourself to control your weight.

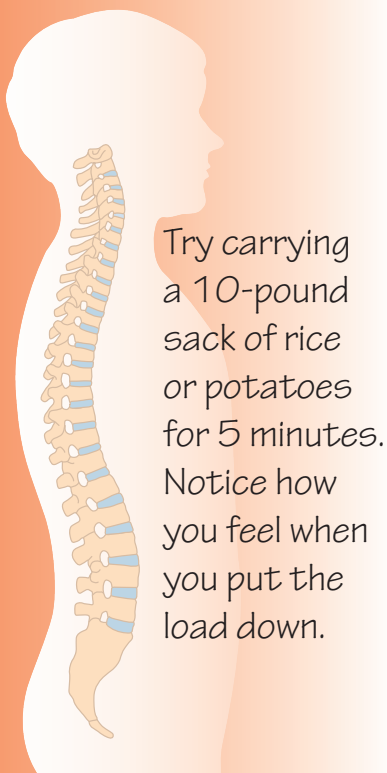
Being overweight strains your back. But you can improve back fitness by losing just a few of those extra pounds. Following the tips below is an easy way to get started. Also try to drink plenty of water each day.



Eat for a Healthy Weight

When you weigh too much, your entire body is under strain. But strict diets aren't the answer. Instead, eat healthy to reach a healthy weight. Pick one of the tips below to try this week:

- ☐ Choose low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese, and yogurt. They supply the calcium your bones need.
- ☐ Eat at least 5 fruits and vegetables a day. These supply energy as well as the vitamins your body needs.
- ☐ Buy fish, chicken without the skin, and meats without marbling. These foods provide protein to keep muscles fit. Tofu and beans are also good sources of protein.
- ☐ Power your muscles with whole-grain breads, cereals, and pasta. Potatoes, squash, and corn are good too.
- ☐ Learn about serving sizes. The size of a serving depends on the food and the food group. Most prepared foods list serving sizes on the package label.



Try carrying a 10-pound sack of rice or potatoes for 5 minutes. Notice how you feel when you put the load down.

SKILL 5

Gaining Flexibility and Strength

To move more freely and feel stronger, exercise each day.

Improve your back fitness with the exercises on these pages. If you're trying to prevent a back problem, do them daily. But if you have a back injury right now, these exercises may not be right for you. Check with your healthcare provider before trying any of them.

Tips for Stretching

When stretching, follow these tips:

- Take it easy. Breathe deeply and slowly on each count. Don't hold your breath.
- Hold stretches for 15 to 30 seconds each time.



□ Pelvic Tilt

Lie on the floor with your arms relaxed and both knees bent. Tighten the muscles in your stomach and buttocks. Tilt your hips slightly toward the ceiling until the small of your back flattens against the floor. Hold. Relax and repeat.

My goal is to do ____ pelvic tilts ____ times a day.



□ Trunk Stretch

From a kneeling position, reach forward as far as you can. Don't let your buttocks lift off your heels. Hold. Return to the starting position and repeat.

My goal is to do ____ trunk stretches ____ times a day.



Warm up before exercise. Walk briskly for 5 minutes before you stretch.

☐ **Bent Knee Hamstring**

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place your hands around your left thigh above the knee. Then straighten your leg until you feel a stretch. Hold. Repeat using the other leg.



My goal is to do ____ bent knee hamstring stretches ____ times each day.

☐ **Knee to Chest**

Lie on your back with both knees bent. Place your hands around your right thigh just above the knee. Gently pull the leg back toward your chest. Hold. Return to starting position. Repeat with the other leg.



My goal is to do ____ knee to chest stretches ____ times each day.

☐ **Cat Stretch**

Begin on your hands and knees. Position your hands under your shoulders, and your knees right under your hips. Your back should be flat. Tighten and tuck your buttocks, and arch your back. Hold. Then release your buttock muscles and flatten your back. Pause and repeat.



My goal is to do ____ cat stretches ____ times each day.

Tips for Building Strength

To improve muscle strength and endurance, do these exercises at least every other day. To stay safe and motivated, follow these tips:

- Start by repeating each exercise 5 to 10 times. As you get stronger, add more repetitions.
- Over time, try to build up to 20 repetitions of each.
- Add to your routine slowly, as you feel able. Try not to add too many repetitions at any one time.
- Keep an exercise log to show your progress.

□ Leg Lifts

Lie on your stomach with your arms folded. Rest your head on your hands. Tighten your buttocks, and slowly lift your left leg. Lift from the hip. Keep your leg straight and the front of your pelvis touching the ground. Lift only as high as is comfortable. Hold, then lower the leg slowly. Repeat with the other leg.



**My goal is to do ____ leg lifts
____ times each day.**

□ Curl-ups

Lie on the floor with your knees bent. Fold your arms across your chest. Inhale. Use your abdominal muscles to raise your body. Keep your ears and shoulders aligned. Pause when your shoulder blades come off the floor. Exhale as you lower. Just before your head touches the floor, begin to raise your body again.



**My goal is to do ____ curl-ups
____ times each day.**

SKILL 6

Handling Pain

Rest isn't always best. If you have back pain, gentle movement is often more helpful.

Most people have some back pain now and then. For minor pain that lasts only a day or two, self-care hints may help. But for ongoing pain, contact your healthcare provider.

Try Cold and Heat

Both cold and heat help control minor pain. Cold also reduces swelling. Always place a cloth between your skin and the source of cold or heat. To help limit pain:

- **Apply cold** the first 24 to 48 hours. Use ice for 10 to 15 minutes each hour you're awake.
- **Use heat** after the first 48 hours. Apply heat for no more than 20 minutes at a time. Never sleep on a heating pad.



When lying down, use pillows and rolled towels to support your back and neck.

Rest but Keep Walking

Resting for a day or two can start the healing process. But try to get up and walk at least once an hour. Walking stretches tight back muscles. While you rest, remember:

- **Lie on your back** with a pillow under your knees or on your side with your knees bent. Support your neck.
- **Get up often.** Try to “roll” out of bed without twisting. Use your arms to push up into a sitting position.



Take any prescribed medications as often as directed. This will help to keep pain under control.

If You Have Ongoing Pain

What if your back pain doesn't improve after a few days? Ongoing back pain may be a symptom of an injury or health problem that needs to be treated by a healthcare provider. If this is a new problem talk with your doctor. He or she can provide treatment or send you to someone who specializes in your type of problem. If you've had this type of back pain before, you may want to contact the provider who took care of you last time.



Your healthcare provider may teach you additional exercises.

When to Call the Doctor

Call your doctor or other healthcare provider if you have any of the following:

- ☐ Pain that is constant or so severe that you cannot stand or walk
- ☐ Pain that lasts more than a few days, gets worse, or doesn't respond to home treatment
- ☐ Pain resulting from an injury
- ☐ Inability to move without pain
- ☐ Pain or numbness in one or both legs
- ☐ Fever along with your pain (see your doctor right away)

SKILL 7

Setting SMART Goals

Having goals can help you improve your back fitness. Why not commit yourself to change? Learn to set SMART goals that you can meet. Then look for ways to beat your barriers to back fitness.

SPECIFIC

Be specific about your goals. Set goals that address the results you want. Your goals should challenge you. But they should also be within reach. What do you want to have happen? **Example:** *I will do exercises to improve my back fitness every other day.*

MEASURABLE

Choose goals that have results you can measure. Give yourself a deadline, such as a week, a month, or six months from now. **Example:** *Within 3 months, I will repeat each exercise 15 times.*

ACHIEVABLE

Can you achieve your goals? You don't want to discourage yourself. Keep in mind that you can always raise the bar after you've reached your first set of goals. **Example:** *I will start by doing each exercise 5 times.*

REWARDING

Give yourself nonfood rewards. How will you reward yourself along the way? Will it be when you achieve your goal? When you pass a milestone on the way to that goal? **Example:** *When I can do all my exercises 10 times without a break, I will buy a new CD.*

TRACKABLE

How will you track your progress? Doing so helps you to see a slip as only a brief setback that you can easily overcome. **Example:** *I will track my progress in a computer file or on a wall chart.*

Break Through Your Barriers

Don't let small worries turn into big barriers. Break out of old habits and set yourself up to get fit. On this page, you'll find tips for busting through common barriers. Check the tip you might want to try first. Then write in a few barrier busters of your own.

Barrier: Exercise hurts.

Barrier Buster: Go easy. Exercise should never hurt.

- ☐ Always warm up and cool down. This will help limit soreness.
- ☐ Practice good posture at home. You'll look and feel better.
- ☐ _____

Barrier: Back fitness is too much work.

Barrier Buster: Back fitness can be fun and simple!

- ☐ Try a class at a health club. Getting fit is easier when you're not alone.
- ☐ Practice good skills while you lift grocery bags or a laundry basket.
- ☐ Eat healthy foods instead of junk food for a month. You might lose a few excess pounds.
- ☐ _____

Barrier: Walking is the only exercise I enjoy.

Barrier Buster: Walking is great for your back.

- ☐ Find three 10-minute slots during your day.
- ☐ Walk with a friend during a work break.
- ☐ Walk around the block before dinner.
- ☐ _____



Staying On Track

When your back is fit, you can move freely. Good posture, strength, and flexibility are the keys to a fit back. Also try to move safely, relax, and keep a healthy weight. By staying on track, you'll be fit for life.

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